

Staff photo/Debra Filcman

Scenic View — O'Neil Farm offers a window into what New England looked like 200 years ago.

Nature, safe from progress

By Debra Filcman
MPG Newspapers

O'Neil Farm, which has been in operation for more than 2½ centuries, has taken on an unexpected role. The last dairy farm in Duxbury, its place in the community has more to do with a forgotten way of life than with the milk it produces.

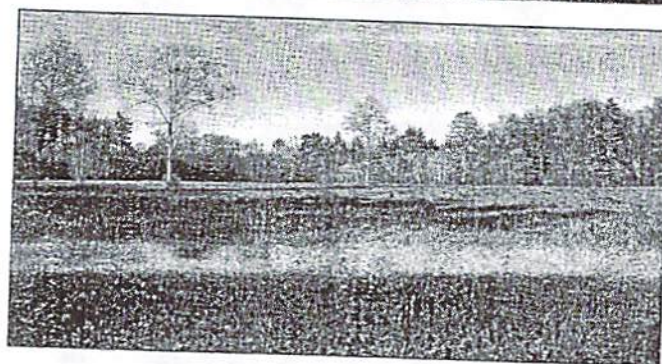
The Wildlands Trust of Southeastern Massachusetts purchased the farm from the O'Neil family for \$4.3 million, in an attempt to keep

it free of development indefinitely. With nearly \$1.5 million of the purchase price coming from the town's community preservation funds, the Wildlands Trust achieved one of its main goals, making the land untouchable to developers. The remainder of the purchase price came from a \$499,000 grant from the commonwealth's agricultural preservation funds, which also protects it against development, and private fundraising.

The Trust created a nonprofit corporation to govern the property, known as the Historic O'Neil Farm Inc. O'Neil and the Wildlands Trust agreed that the corporation required a \$1 million endowment to ensure its continued sustainability. Carl O'Neil, chairman of the corporation, donated \$600,000 of the farm's proceeds to the corporation and the trust hopes to raise the remaining \$400,000 by the end of June.

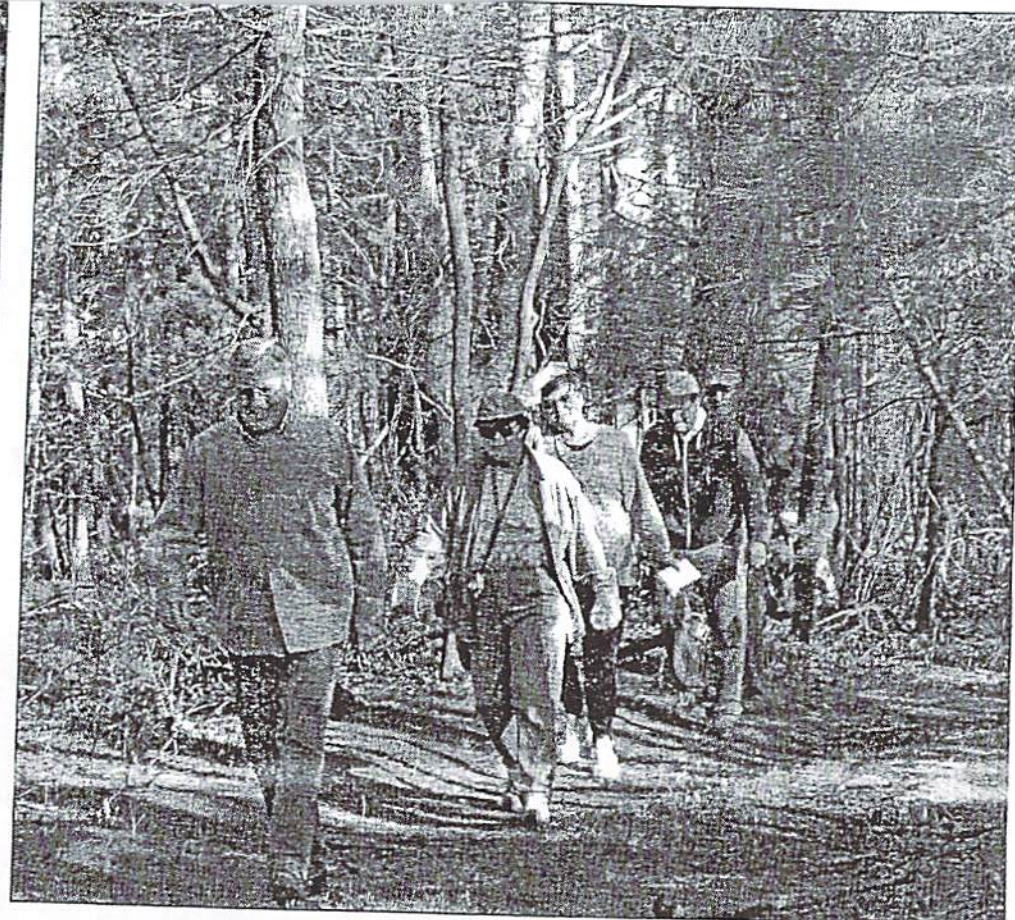
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Staff photo/Debra Filcman
Intrepid guide
 Wildlands Trust
 deputy director
 Aileen Chase de-
 scribes the trail
 she'll lead the group
 along.



Slim pickings — Carl O'Neil shows a pasture he cuts for hay. He said it doesn't provide nearly enough for his more than 40 cows.

Staff photo/Debra Filcman



Nature walk — Visitors follow one of few trails already laid out on the O'Neil Farm.

Staff photo/Debra Filcman

Wildlands Trust preserves historic Duxbury dairy farm

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"I believe in angels," said Aileen Chase, deputy director of the Wildlands Trust. "I can't tell you the number of times when I thought to myself, 'I don't know where money is going to come from,' and then an angel came in and saved us."

While Chase is busy applying for grants, she's also looking for another angel to help them raise the remainder of the proposed endowment. Wednesday she led the first walking tour of the O'Neil Farm since the land was saved. The tours, different from the ones that were given last year, are meant to

educate the public about the farm's history and purpose, giving folks a reason to donate to the corporation. Another walk is scheduled for July 9.

"Now that the property has been protected and secured, people might not think about donating anymore," said former project manager and current volunteer, Pat Loring.

"We did walks last June looking for support at town meeting, and now we're looking for support for the corporation."

Although the current tours do not go past the barn and cows, other wildlife can be seen. From hawks nesting to wild turkeys run-

ning in the fields to deer frozen in the woods, children and adults alike can see a whole new side of Duxbury, Loring said.

"It's also just beautiful New England scenery," Loring said. "Looking at some of the pastures, you can really get a sense of what this farm looked like 200 years ago."

As recently as the 1980s, there were six dairy farms operating in Duxbury alone, Chase said. Now, the Historic O'Neil Farm Inc. is the town's last chance to hold onto a vanishing way of life.

"To me, it's really about education," Chase said. "Children need to see the correlation between the

land and the food they eat."

A lot of children, she said, simply buy a half gallon of milk in the store or merely take it out of the fridge, and never think about where it comes from.

The O'Neil farm produces about 1.5 tons of milk every other day, according to farmer Carl O'Neil. The farm was in his family for 175 years. Milked twice daily, a single cow, he said as he joined about a dozen residents on the first tour this year, can produce upwards of 80 pounds of milk each day.

The milk from his 42 cows is sold to the Agrimark farmers cooperative, which produces Cabot

cheeses. The milk is high quality for cheese making, he said.

O'Neil told visitors that he has a "closed herd," which means that he raises all replacements.

"Cows aren't like horses," O'Neil said. "They need to earn their keep. If they aren't calving once a year, I have to sell them because it's for the best of the herd."

Nonetheless, he's kept many healthy cows for up to 17 years, he said, predominantly without the use of antibiotics.

O'Neil excused himself from the tour to get back to work — unloading bails of hay — as the group continued through pristine fields and woods off Autumn Avenue.